

Introduction

HANA WIRTH-NESHER

America extended unprecedented freedom to a people who had learned to survive with restrictions for centuries. The Jews who landed on America's shores had little preparation for life that promised more than they had ever imagined. "Have children ever been so safe?" contemplates a character in a Philip Roth story as he surveys middle-class suburbia in postwar America; "the world was at last a place for families, even Jewish families."¹ The United States offered equality under the law, freedom of movement, economic opportunity, and a supple language open to innovation. However, it did not happen all at once. The history of Jews in America did not originate in a miraculous escape from the limits imposed by prejudice. Beginning with the refusal, by Peter Stuyvesant, director-general of New Netherland, to grant Jews the privileges accorded to other newcomers, including the all-important right to homeownership, and continuing to discrimination in university admission, access to professions, and club membership in what was to become the United States, exclusionary practices that had plagued Jews in the Old World persisted in their American experience.² Even so, Jews had never before received a message like the one sent by President George Washington to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, in which he characterized the United States government as one that "gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance." Echoing the prophet Micah, Washington describes America as a place where Jews "would merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants; while everyone shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig free and there shall be none to make him afraid."³ And indeed, Jews had never succeeded in integrating into the mainstream of their societies, personally and collectively, to the extent that they had in the United States. When Emma Lazarus proclaimed, in her triumphal poem "1492," that this "two-faced year" marked both Spain's casting forth "the children of the prophets of the Lord" and "a virgin world where doors of sunset part,"⁴ it was not the geography of the Americas that she was praising, but rather the ideology of the United States. After all, the first Jews to reach

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

HANA WIRTH-NESHER

North America's shores in 1654 had not departed from Europe; they were fleeing from the Americas where they had sought shelter from the Inquisition only to find that it had followed them to Brazil. When she celebrated a "virgin world" that parted its doors for newcomers, she meant the United States of America.

Just as America is the exception in Jewish history for the freedoms that it proffered, Lazarus's poem is an exception in Jewish American literature for its unqualified praise and celebration of the new nation.⁵ Jewish American writers, particularly in prose, have portrayed America from the point of view of both insiders and outsiders, heady with its promise yet often ill at ease with the costs exacted by Americanization.⁶ This bedrock ambivalence is part of what makes Jewish American writing a dynamic and mutable discourse, in which the terms "Jewish" and "American" interact and signify in ways that are sometimes discrepant, sometimes complementary, and always dialectical. If literary narratives often tend to be accounts of individual aspirations tested by social resistance, the narratives of Jewish American writers include accounts of dual resistance, as their protagonists often faced challenges from both their own community as well as others. The great waves of immigrants who expected "a goldine medine," a golden land, quickly found their romantic visions tempered by their encounters with unfettered capitalism, racism, and religious prejudice, undeniable personal obstacles in the real lives that provided the raw material for so much of their art. Moreover, they also encountered resistance from their own ethnoreligious community, fearful as it was of the freedoms that threatened to diminish Jewish religious practice and ethnic allegiance, and fearful too of the gentile majority gaze. This self-consciousness as Jews persisted well beyond the generation of immigrants, so that one of the assumptions about this corpus, that it was primarily a literature focused on the immigrant experience, has been disproven by the flourishing of Jewish American writing to the present day.⁷ As Jews faced fewer barriers to their integration into American society, and as they played an increasingly greater role in the shaping of American culture, the crucial duality that had always characterized Jewish experience in America – greater freedom at the cost of diminished communal identity – continued to create unease and reflection, powerful catalysts for art.

The abundance, variety, and quality of Jewish American writing have, in turn, inspired commentary, criticism, and scholarship that attest to its continuing vitality and its value and fascination for readers, students, and scholars. In recent years, journals are devoting special issues to the subject, anthologies and collections are facilitating the teaching of this rich body of writings, and

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

gifted authors are adding their perspectives to what was already a treasure trove of writings. *The Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature* emerges out of this atmosphere of creativity and intellectual ferment, offering new directions, new accounts, and new readings of this multifaceted canon. Traditional scholarship on Jewish American literature has tended to measure how much of the quality called “Jewishness” has been retained and how much “Americanness” it has absorbed, often treating these concepts as self-evident.⁸ But the story of the Jewish American experience, and of its role in the formation of American culture, is far more nuanced than this dualistic narrative of preservation and assimilation suggests. The guiding principle for this volume is that the categories of “American literature” and “Jewish literature” are mutually constitutive, both variously refracting the Judaic civilization and the American ideology from which they arise. As such, *The Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature* aims to contribute to the discussion in both American and Jewish literary study that emphasizes mutual interaction, intersection, and dialogue. Although the abundance, scope, and power of this literature, encompassing such well-known authors as Emma Lazarus, Saul Bellow, Henry Roth, Grace Paley, Philip Roth, and Cynthia Ozick, are uncontested, locating the study of this field on the map of American academia poses questions about the categories of identity currently in place and their implications for American literary history.

The publication of *The Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature* at this time reflects developments in American culture and in literary studies that would appear to be mutually contradictory. On the one hand, as I have already pointed out, Jewish American literature is thriving, and reaching mainstream audiences. On the other hand, the teaching of this literature is often marginalized in the field of American literature, and simultaneously channeled into Jewish studies. While this body of literature undeniably deserves a place in Jewish culture studies, a subject to which I shall return, it also deserves to be recognized as an inherent component of the dynamic field of American literature. Two landmark events since the turn of the millennium illustrate these contradictory developments. The first was a three-day conference at Princeton University in 2001 entitled “Celebrating Jewish American Writers,” to mark the opening of the Leonard Milberg ’53 Collection of Jewish American Writers, an invaluable archive of first editions and unpublished manuscripts. The organizers of the conference, most of whom were from the Princeton English Department, convened a stellar group of authors, among them E. L. Doctorow, Tony Kushner, Will Eisner, Jules Feiffer, Grace Paley, Art Spiegelman, Robert Pinsky, C. K. Williams, Wendy Wasserstein, and Susan

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

HANA WIRTH-NESHER

Sontag. According to Morris Dickstein, “It [was] the first and probably the largest such gathering of Jewish-American writers ever.”⁹ It was a turning point for Jewish American writing, because Princeton lent its prestige to a burgeoning field by attributing value to its rare editions and manuscripts, and by sponsoring a high profile symposium. After the conference, the *Princeton Library Chronicle* devoted two volumes to Jewish American writing and scholarship, and a new fund was established to promote the teaching of Jewish American culture in the English and American Studies curriculum.¹⁰ While this event could be seen as valedictory, a celebration of the postwar golden age of Jewish American literature, there were many younger writers participating as well.

Despite this achievement for a field that had been gathering momentum for decades, several years later, in 2009, scholars and teachers of Jewish American literature organized a panel at the Modern Language Association entitled “Does the English Department Have a Jewish Problem?” prompted by “the imbalance between the lack of emphasis on Jewishness by English departments and the influential role Jews have historically played in the production, consumption, and transformation of American literature.”¹¹ Motivated by the great interest generated by this event, *Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS)* subsequently devoted a special issue to “The Future of Jewish American Literary Studies.” Drawing on the stimulating questions posed by the panel, the editors asked, “Will Jewish American literature remain homeless, relegated to disciplinary exile, or might it find a home in the twenty-first century English department?”¹² This provocative question, ironically alluding to the centrality of exile in Jewish history, reflects recent shifts in defining ethnicity in America that tend to exclude Jewish American literature from the English Department curriculum. How did this happen?

For nearly half a century, American literary study has been recognizing and affirming the multiplicity of voices that go into the making of the national literature. The labels that define these collective voices may sound alike – as in African American, Native American, Asian American, Jewish American, Latina/o – but each has its own distinct history and features, and each contributes to the idea of American literature in its own particular way. What they have in common is that the term qualifying “American” originates outside the United States or precedes its nationhood, yet has also been shaped by the idea of America, as both nation and hemisphere. What they also share is their reference to an ethnic or racial minority. Jewish American writing has played a significant role in the development of the concepts of cultural pluralism and ethnic culture, both as resistance to the ideal of the melting pot in the early

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

decades of the twentieth century, and later as one participant among others in the search to recover roots that reached its peak in the 1960s and 1970s. A brief look at the evolution of these concepts in America may shed light on current debates about the place of Jewish American literature in university programs and curricula.

Horace Kallen's essay "Democracy versus the Melting Pot" advocated preservation of ethnic culture as a strategy to fortify the American nation, and challenged the prevailing melting pot ideology.¹³ The son of Russian Jewish immigrants, Kallen proposed a concept of ethnicity and cultural diversity derived from biology. If biological diversity signified progress in the natural world, he argued, then cultural diversity signified progress in the social world. For Kallen, who used his own group affiliation as a Jew to demonstrate the benefits of a hyphenated identity, the non-American label in any hyphenated identity was stable and continuous, unaffected by interaction with other groups or by economic or political factors. The term "Jewish" in "Jewish American" was self-evident, expressed in his often quoted declaration that men "cannot change their grandfathers."¹⁴ Kallen believed that "the selfhood which is inalienable" in Americans, and which requires "inalienable liberty" to realize, "is always "ancestrally determined."¹⁵ He proposed that the United States become a federal republic model where each national group would retain its dialect and its intellectual forms.

Kallen's model of ethnicity prevailed during the first phase of ethnic literary study when the paradigmatic ethnic figure was the American immigrant, and Jewish American literature could therefore be examined alongside other immigrant literatures, such as Italian American, Polish American, or German American. The idea of ethnicity, however, has undergone changes, not only since Kallen first recommended preserving ethnic culture as a strategy for bolstering democracy, but also since Glazer and Moynihan's findings half a century later, in *Beyond the Melting Pot*, that ethnicity trumped class in American social and political behavior.¹⁶ Werner Sollors's landmark study *Beyond Ethnicity* questioned the usefulness of this idea of authentic, enduring, and static identity through descent by calling attention to the role of consent, the contractual self-made component of American identity, whose engagement with the hereditary, ancestral descent component constitutes "the central drama in American culture."¹⁷ Sollors focused on the construction of ethnicity to ensure difference and monitor boundaries in the process of consenting to become American, rather than on the center as an inherited essence. Ethnicities forged in America, he argued, needed to be understood comparatively as the dynamic of free agents negotiating

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

HANA WIRTH-NESHER

descent and consent in relation to other minority groups doing the same. According to Sollors, “ethnic literature provides us with the central codes of Americanness.”¹⁸

In contrast to Sollors’s all-encompassing approach, which subsumed race into ethnicity, more recent discussions of literature and ethnicity have foregrounded race, with consequences for Jewish American literary study. In a comparative analysis of Jewish American literature in relation to Chicano and African American writing, Dean Franco sums up the two models of ethnicity currently employed in American studies: “First of the two dominant types is the immigrant American as the paradigmatic ethnic prior to World War II, and the second is the ethnic American of color, actively resistant to assimilation.”¹⁹ According to Dean Franco, “The former group produced a substantial body of literature matched by critical attention up to and following the rise of multicultural consciousness. The latter group effectively contested the prominent representation of the former and successfully established a new critical ethos in ethnic literary study.”²⁰ This new critical ethos is exemplified by David Palumbo-Liu’s book *The Ethnic Canon*, in which essays on African American, Asian American, Native American, and Latino/a writings describe a “critical multiculturalism” that does not include Jewish American literature.²¹ Palumbo-Liu’s account of literary study from an ethnic perspective allows only one intervention by Jewish Americans, which he draws from David Hollinger’s account of how a secular intelligentsia of the children of Eastern European Jewish immigrants in the 1940s and 1950s joined ranks with academic descendants of WASP families to forge a cosmopolitan culture that served each group to revolt against what they considered to be the provincial inheritance of their respective cultures.²² It was a moment when the alienation of the Jewish intellectual dovetailed with the existential alienation brought on by modernity, urbanism, and the horrors of the Second World War. For Palumbo-Liu, this broadening of culture toward cosmopolitanism has been rewritten in the activities of a “critical multiculturalism,” which “explores the fissures, tensions, and sometimes the contradictory demands of multiple cultures, rather than (only) celebrating the plurality of cultures by passing through them appreciatively.” In other words, the descendants of white European immigrants who have made it into the mainstream no longer qualify as ethnic Americans, and therefore their literature is not included in a canon whose primary criterion is the production of fissures and tensions, rather than the appreciation of diversity. This redefinition of ethnicity and minority culture in large part accounts for the recent marginalizing of Jewish American literature in English and American Studies curricula, as recognition

Introduction

of the extraordinary achievements of these authors and works does not automatically translate into courses.

In light of these developments in literary study, *The Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature* makes a case both for the vibrancy of this field and for its potential to reopen questions about the study of minority and ethnic literatures in the United States. With its diverse approaches and wide array of topics, the volume challenges the assumption that this body of writing belongs to an older paradigm of ethnic literature that merely celebrates diversity and poses no resistance to assimilation. On the contrary, Jewish American literature and the scholarship on it defy any clear dichotomy between assimilation and resistance, and have always addressed the “fissures and tensions” between multiple cultures. The distinctive features of Jewish American culture that invite a reexamination of models of minority writing in America are religion, peoplehood (ethnic and cultural), race, and language.

First of all, Jewish American literature cannot be satisfactorily subsumed within the designation of ethnicity alone, because Jewishness is also a religion, a powerful force in American culture that has received less attention than race, ethnicity, gender, and class.²³ Moreover, it is a religion that has played, and continues to play, a central role in America’s vision of itself. In Puritan rhetoric, the Jews appear in their ancestral and biblical incarnation as the Children of Israel and as Hebrews. The rhetorical underpinnings of America, as articulated by Sacvan Bercovitch in *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, is a story of supersession that builds on Christian hermeneutics where the Hebrew Scriptures are superseded by the New Testament, rendering the former an allegorical prefiguring of the latter.²⁴ America’s Puritan forefathers saw themselves as the new Chosen People led out of their enslavement in Europe to the new Promised Land, where salvation was communal and political as well as personal. In this theological vision, Jews existed only as ancient Hebrews prerequisite to the unfolding of scriptural history. Jewish sources and Judaism were necessary precursors to the Christian mission of settling the new Promised Land, America. As Jonathan Freedman puts it, “Jews are both essential and eradicable; their covenant is the model for that of Puritan believers and hence crucial for the unfolding of human history, yet at the same time replaceable by Christians molded in their image.”²⁵ Jews, therefore, were the only immigrants to America who could not readily assimilate this Puritan rhetoric of a new Promised Land and a new Chosen People without giving up the most central tenets of their faith. For Christian Americans, Jews were the Other in the narrative of their sacred cause.²⁶

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

HANA WIRTH-NESHER

The notion of Hebrews as the long-dead ancestors to the New Israel is dramatized in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's mid-nineteenth century poem "The Jewish Cemetery at Newport"²⁷ (1858), where Jewish citizens of the United States are converted posthumously into Hebrews: "How strange it seems! These Hebrews in their graves," he writes, concluding that "what once has been shall be no more! . . . And the dead nations never rise again." For Christian Americans, Jews in the form of extinct Israelites and Hebrews were compatible with America's divine mission. Living Jews, however, fleeing poverty and persecution for America's shores, were an impediment. Despite the dawn of the modern nation state, and in particular the political secularism that led to America's separation of church and state, poets such as Longfellow continued to identify Jews as ancestral Hebrews whose burial ground is the site from which America emanates as more than a geographical place. The elision of Hebrews and Jews is particularly significant in this period, when, in contrast, Jews in Europe were being racialized and would soon seek refuge in the United States in massive numbers.²⁸ The theological role of Jews in the rhetoric of the American nation left its imprint on the United States of America, even as that nation severed itself from religion in law but not in spirit. No other immigrant group would have to contend with such a privileged yet vexed place in the very concept of the American nation due to their religion. When the WASP Quincy Davenport, in Israel Zangwill's play *The Melting Pot* accuses David Quixano of presuming to claim America as his own, "Your America, forsooth, you Jew immigrant," Quixano admits, "Yes – Jew immigrant! . . . But a Jew who knows that your Pilgrim Fathers came straight out of his Old Testament."²⁹

Within a decade of Longfellow's poem, Emma Lazarus would contest his conclusion with a poem of her own that reaffirms Judaism as a living religion: "And still the sacred shrine is holy yet," she insists in the last stanza of "In the Jewish Synagogue at Newport," "Take off your shoes as by the burning bush, / Before the mystery of death and God."³⁰ A quarter of a century after Longfellow's eulogy for the noble Hebrews, Lazarus invoked Hebraism as the custodian of American freedom in her poem "The New Colossus" (1883), subsequently affixed to the pedestal of America's most well-known icon, the Statue of Liberty. Inspired by the plight of Eastern European Jews fleeing to America to escape the violence of pogroms, the poem makes a clear distinction between the Old Colossus, "a brazen giant of Greek fame"³¹ that represents Hellenic pagan culture, and the New Colossus, "Mother of Exiles," the Hebraic antithesis to Greece, which will safeguard the ingathering of exiles into the New Promised Land.³² For Lazarus, whose volunteer

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

work for the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society took her to Wards Island to witness what she would describe as “the huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” the Jews were a transnational people who deserved the safety and freedom that America could provide, and they were the torchbearers of the Hebraic culture underlying America’s sacred freedom.³³ Her universal vision of America as a haven for “the wretched refuse” of European injustice was initially conceived as a solution for Jewish victimization, expressed most dramatically in the poem “1492.” Furthermore, she expressed her sense of kinship with Jews not only in her efforts on behalf of immigrants, but also by entitling a collection of her poems *Songs of a Semite*. Although the concepts of Aryan and Semite originated in comparative philology, they eventually became mythic racial categories with devastating effects.³⁴ For Lazarus, who translated poems by both the Hebrew medieval poet Yehuda HaLevi and the German Jewish poet Heinrich Heine about the Western Jew’s longings for an ancient homeland in the East, to be a Semite meant romantic identification with an Oriental home and language. Her poetry serves as a site of the intersection of Christian Puritan rhetoric that she had assimilated and her self-designated identity as a Semite, ironically blending a nostalgic embrace of Eastern origins with an emergent racialism that foreshadows the fate of the Jew in the West in the twentieth century – victims of genocide for being racially cast as Semites.

Jewish American literature dramatizes the ways in which Jews in America have regarded themselves as members of both a religion and a people, a faith and an ethnicity, often differentiated by the terms “Judaism” and “Jewishness,” respectively. On one hand, then, Judaism in America has indeed been partly shaped by Christian America, as manifested in the elevation of Chanukah in response to massive public observance of Christmas. On the other hand, the very idea of ethnicity in America as a model of descent that ensures cultural pluralism, which in turn ensures democracy, originated, as I have already mentioned, in the work of Horace Kallen, a Jewish American philosopher and social thinker who based his idea of essential ethnic identity on the experience of his own Jewish community.

One more significant factor that distinguishes Jewish American identity from hyphenated identities that are derived from immigration history alone is language. As a transnational people, Jews did not consider their primary identity to be that of their specific country of origin. Most of them did not see themselves as Russians, Poles, or any other nation rooted in a specific locale, but rather as a people who shared religion, kinship, language, history, and/or a repertoire of texts. For the vast majority of Jews who emigrated from

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

HANA WIRTH-NESHER

Europe, close to two million during what was known as the Great Migration between 1880 and 1924, their vernacular was Yiddish and their liturgical language was Hebrew.³⁵ By 1899, the Bureau of Immigration recognized this by applying the term “Hebrew” to Jewish newcomers. For many Sephardic Jews, the majority of the 4 percent of the U.S. Jewish community who were not of Germanic or Eastern European origin, their everyday language was Ladino, otherwise known as Judeo-Espagnol, with Hebrew reserved for religious rites.³⁶ From a linguistic perspective, this meant that when Jews, like other immigrants, adopted English, and when their descendants abandoned their familial tongue, they retained Hebrew as a common language that bound them to other Jews globally. The U.S. government acknowledged this unusual detachment of native language from country of origin in 1910, when they introduced the category of “mother tongue” for immigrants, recording “Yiddish and Hebrew” for Jews rather than the language of the site of their embarkation for the New World.

Insofar as Jews were not Christian, they could not easily subscribe to the Puritan rhetoric of America as the new Promised Land, yet insofar as they did not regard themselves as leaving their countries of origin when they emigrated, they could readily embrace America from the perspective of a diasporic people who traced their origins to ancient Israel. Their ancestral homeland, then, as well as their common language, whose alphabet also extended to their unique languages, Yiddish and Ladino, were of the East. In short, most Jewish Americans subscribed to both Western and Eastern narratives of their past. The great majority thought of themselves as Europeans, with a sharp internal division between Eastern European and German Jews, whose attitude toward religion was profoundly influenced by the Enlightenment and the emergence of Reform Judaism. By the same token, regardless of whether they were Eastern or Western geographically, they also took with them the components of their Jewish culture that were Eastern, and their racial designation as Semitic. Moreover, many non-Ashkenazi Jews, those who hailed from Spanish- or Portuguese-speaking areas of Western Europe, or Ladino-speaking communities of the Ottoman Empire (Sephardi), or the Middle East and Western Asia (Mizrahi), or Greek-speaking Jews of the Byzantine Empire (Romaniotes), have been perceived as non-European by both gentiles and Jews in America, as they do not fit neatly into the paradigm of the Jew as Western. In recent years, the descendants of these immigrants (and newer generations of Jewish immigrants from the Middle East, Latin America, Asia, and Southern Europe) have formed social and cultural alliances with both Hispanic and Arab communities in the United States.